

# Aeroflot Union Leader Caught Red-Handed Denies Fraud Charges

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A second member of an Aeroflot pilots' union accused of taking advantage of a pay dispute to defraud the flagship airline was remanded in custody by a Moscow court Tuesday.

Alexei Shlyapnikov is the second of two union leaders to be jailed after the pair reportedly attempted to solicit 100 million rubles (\$3.1 million) from Aeroflot and obtain a part of the sum in cash from a VTB 24 bank deposit box.

Shlyapnikov and Valery Pimoshenko, who has been in custody since Saturday, are members of the non-official Sheremetyevo Cockpit Personnel Association union, or SPCA, which represents 900 out of about 1500 Aeroflot pilots, who are involved in an ongoing row over pay and conditions.

"It was all part of an agreement with Aeroflot management," Shlyapnikov said Tuesday, looking tired and desperate standing behind bars prior to the court hearing.

He said he denied charges brought up against him.

"The money was intended for the pilots, whose names were approved by the airline," he said, adding that to pay out parts of wages in cash was common practice in the company.

A spokesman for Aeroflot denied these claims.

"About a month ago the detained SCPA leaders started to blackmail one of Aeroflot's CEOs and threatened him with mass riots and the collapse of nation's largest airline if he did not pay the activists a hefty sum of money," Aeroflot spokesman Andrei Sogrin said, Kommersant reported Monday.

After this, the airline reportedly turned to the authorities, leading to the attempt to withdraw cash and the arrest of the activists this weekend.

Aeroflot has been embroiled in a pay and conditions dispute with its pilots for some time. In July the Moscow City Court ruled that the company was obliged to pay a debt it owed its pilots and flight attendants for flying at night and working in hazardous working conditions. The airline's indebtedness to about 1,200 pilots stood at more than 1 billion rubles (\$30 million), the court ruled.

Aeroflot initially stalled on payments, starting to transfer money only in the beginning of September, after pilots and flight attendants had held several protest meetings, demanding pay, in front of the airline headquarters.

According to the SCPA, about 150 pilots and flight attendants have been fully or partially paid by Aeroflot, and the issue remains raw.

Aeroflot says they are paying out the money in strict accordance with the court ruling.

The president of the SCPA union, Igor Deldyuzhov, said he did not know how the situation had reached the point that Pimoshenko and Shlyapnikov were caught with their hands in a deposit box or why they went to the bank in the first place.

"I thought they were discussing a new labor contract with Aeroflot flight director Igor Chalik. The money issue looks like a setup," Deldyuzhov said.

At the court hearing Tuesday, the prosecution said they had all the necessary evidence to prove Pimoshenko and Shlyapnikov were guilty of attempted fraud. On the contrary, said the defense, no evidence of their guilt has so far been presented to the court other than the claims of the alleged victim.

Another activist, Sergei Knyshev, who also represents the Mozhaisky municipal district in the Moscow region legislative assembly, was arrested Sunday as he was coming back from a fishing trip in the Moscow region. His conditions and the charges brought against him are as yet unknown.

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